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Before the
FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
Washington, DC 20554

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| In the Matter of |) | |
| |) | |
| Comment Requested on a La Carte and Themed |) | |
| Tier Programming and Pricing Options for |) | MB Docket No. 04-207 |
| Programming Distribution on Cable Television |) | |
| And Direct Broadcast Satellite Systems |) | |

The National Religious Broadcasters is an international association of Christian communicators with over 1,700 member organizations. Our members reach millions of listeners, viewers and readers through Television, Radio, Internet, and Film. Recent research has confirmed the strength of our broadcast platform. More than 141 million Americans listen to religious programming at least once a month. I currently serve as Chairman and CEO of our Association.

I also currently serve as Chairman and CEO of Christian Television Network, a 24-hour per day TV network carried on cable and satellite. In addition, my wife, Karin, and I are the sole FCC licensees of two over-the-air TV stations – WLPC TV-26 Detroit, Michigan, and WLPN TV-61 New Orleans, Louisiana. The Christian Television Network is African American owned.

Let me begin by commending the members of the Federal Communications Commission for the important work you do and for the largely non-partisan way in which you approach that work. As a nation, we owe you a debt of gratitude for helping shepherd us through what has become an astonishing period of technological change in electronic media. Seemingly, every decision you make is scrutinized and criticized. Your willingness to examine the cable industry's business model and it's potential restructuring is certainly a volatile issue. It is an almost impossible task and I commend you for giving it your best efforts.

The proposal for *A La Carte* channel choice on cable television has a number of excellent benefits and a variety of things that commend it. Chief among them is the choice of channel selection provided to the consumer, and the associated price options it should also provide the subscriber. An *A La Carte* system is also much more consistent with a market-driven economy than one that has semblances or likenesses of a monopoly.

Cable television has evolved into a form of natural monopoly today. Although satellite DBS service, such as DirecTV and Echostar, is providing some competition today, almost everyone agrees that “Cable is King.” As an illustration, cable offers a form of *A La Carte* service now -- Video on Demand or VOD. VOD allows subscribers to watch “what they want to watch, when they want to watch it” without the need to record it. On the VOD platform, if I want to watch “*60 Minutes*”, I would not have to watch it at 7:00pm ET on Sundays, when CBS offers it, I can watch it at any time without recording it. Without the use of TIVO, or any other recording device, it would be available to me at any time, and I would have full VCR capabilities, including rewind, pause and fast-forward. This *A La Carte* type television service is ONLY available on cable – not satellite, and not free over-the-air broadcasting.

It therefore seems odd, and somewhat disingenuous, for cable MSO’s to fight so vehemently against a consumer choice service like *A La Carte*, especially when they are investing very significant resources (billions of dollars) into an *A La Carte* type product called Video on Demand (VOD).

I sincerely believe that *A La Carte* can provide tremendous benefits for our country, and therefore I would be inclined to recommend support for it, but in my opinion, it also suffers from some very serious defects. At least as *A La Carte* was originally proposed. Chief among these defects are the uncertainties that *A La Carte* would create for “Must Carry” stations.

The Supreme Court of the United States has upheld an important governmental interest in preserving the benefits of free over-the-air local broadcast television. With the dramatic increase in cable and satellite penetration of U.S. households, free over-the-air broadcasters are dependent, now more than ever, on the Must Carry provisions of federal law. This is equally true of religious broadcasters. When our members purchase airtime on local broadcast affiliates, their potential viewing audience could be marginal without Must Carry. Without the presence of some basic tier, which must include all free over-the-air broadcasters, religious broadcasters would be irreparably harmed and an important voice in our cultural dialogue would be silenced. Practically speaking, it only makes sense to offer subscribers an initial basic tier of programming. In short, while *A La Carte* would ostensibly offer consumers more freedom to choose, in the end their choices could be reduced if the economic model that supports many broadcasters is damaged or destroyed. I am suggesting *A La Carte* to be over and above a basic tier.

Let me emphasize that National Religious Broadcasters has not yet taken a position to support or oppose *A La Carte* outright. We believe, however, that there may be some compromise language that would be acceptable to our members. While I have not come today to offer the specifics of that compromise language, let me offer a description of what I believe it must include. First, for NRB to support *A La Carte*, it must include specific language that preserves the existing Must Carry provisions of federal law. In addition to the Must Carry tier of broadcast programs, another important class of programming must also be protected. These are the networks that secure cable carriage through fees paid to cable operators. A significant number of our religious programmers secure carriage on cable television in that manner.

In light of this full discussion, a very significant point needs to be made at this point. In the current cable structure, high priority is not given to religious or minority programs. I can only speculate as to why there has been such a resistance to carrying religious and minority programming networks. The fact remains that religious broadcasters and minority broadcasters have consistently experienced great difficulty in gaining access onto cable television. Because of the resistance of cable operators to carry religious networks in particular, Must Carry became absolutely critical for many broadcasters. Beyond Must Carry, however, and in an *A La Carte* environment, I honestly believe religious and ethnic programming would fair excellently, but the bigger issue for us remains ACCESS. If we still do not have access in an *A La Carte* environment, this entire discussion remains fruitless.

In the current issue of CableFAX's CableWorld magazine (a cable industry publication for July 5-18) the cover story feature's MSO cable executives positively affirming the benefits of VOD and other *A La Carte* style offerings that are targeting ethnic markets.

Because cable executives, generally speaking, have not given fair carriage to religious and minority networks, *A LA Carte* could be the answer! A recent survey discovered that over 80% of the African American community supports black media, if it's available to them. The African American community makes up 12% of the US population, but almost double the percentage (23%) of cable viewership. BET (Black Entertainment Television) is still the only black TV network on cable with full nationwide carriage. They have segmented themselves in to one basic subculture – Hip Hop/Urban programming. The problem is that much of BET's programming, targeted toward black America, does not meet decency standards. I do not mean to sound judgmental or callous, but a large percentage of their programming is considered offensive, indecent, and in some cases plain filthy. There is a tremendous need in our country to raise children in a morally clean atmosphere. Some of what BET does is excellent, but there is a tremendous need for wholesome family-oriented programming targeting the inner city. All we need is a chance to have access. All we want is a chance.

If an A La Carte platform will give other religious and minority networks greater access, then that's what we need. The article I mentioned earlier in CableWorld, illustrated this fact with Hispanic or Latino networks. *A La Carte* actually seems to be most beneficial to an ethnic or minority market.

In conclusion, whether an A La Carte system is made available or not, what is absolutely necessary, is the need to review the current cable TV structure. Giving consumers a broader and better choice makes a lot of sense. Giving a larger number of broadcasters and a broader range of other programmers a greater opportunity for access and carriage contributes to a healthier culture.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to thank the entire committee for the opportunity and privilege to address this extremely important issue.

Sincerely,

Reverend Glenn Plummer
Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of the Christian Television Network